

An easy METHOD of managing
DIFFERENCES in JUDGMENT,
about religious Tenets, humbly pointed out.

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S E R M O N,

P R E A C H E D

At the opening of the ASSOCIATE SYNOD,
at their meeting in Bristow-church, near
Edinburgh, October 6. 1761.

B Y

MR. A N D R E W M O I R,
Minister of the Gospel at SELKIRK.

ACTS xxi. 34. *And some-cried one thing, some another, among the multitude. —*

A doctore glorioso, à pastore contentioso, et inutilibus
quæstionibus liberet ecclesiam Deus. LUTHER.

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M D C C L X I I I.

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S E R M O N.

I COR. xi. 18.

*I hear that there be divisions among you ; and
I partly believe it.*

CONTENTIONS and animosities are the bane of society. By these empires have been subverted, kingdoms depopulated, and cities razed to the ground. Let the ruins of antiquity witness what havock and devastation they have occasioned among mankind. Unobserved, perhaps, in their source, they have sprung up unchecked, and diffused their malignant influence even amongst brethren and friends: and thus bursting asunder the strictest ties of humanity, have sown the seeds of these direful calamities, which, in process of time, have involved nations in wars, and overwhelmed whole empires in one promiscuous ruin.

How fatal these baleful evils have been to the interests of religion, the present melancholy state of the church catholic too plainly demonstrates. This sacred society has, without all doubt, the advantage of every other in point of argument, for enforcing the duties of *unity* and *peace* upon its members. What more forcible considerations can be suggested for promoting these desirable purposes, than those endearing

characters of *brethren*, and *members of the same body*? And yet, how little are these attended to! or rather, how intirely disregarded by the generality of Christians in their mutual contentions! Against these the Apostle solemnly enters his caveat in this epistle to the Corinthians. The occasion of it was owing to certain *corruptions*, which had early found their way into the Corinthian church. Amongst others, a *disorderly form of administering the Lord's supper* had taken place. The apostle Paul, ever zealous for the purity of divine institutions, endeavours to correct these abuses. In the words of our text, he acquaints them of the information which he had received concerning them; *I hear*, says he, *that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.*

I shall not mention the various conjectures which interpreters have offered concerning these abuses. Only I observe, that from the hints which the apostle gives in the context, it is plain, these divisions, among the members of the church of Corinth, did not amount to a *separation in practice*, or a *dividing from one another in point of communion*; no: the matter appears to have been no more than certain DIFFERENCES in JUDGMENT * among them concerning the *decorum* and *order* proper to be observed in *administering the Lord's supper*. The subsequent context puts this beyond all doubt: for the apostle declares, that he, in part believed the report which he had received concerning their division; and he gives it as a reason for his doing so, that he was certain there would also be *heresies* among them. In our text, and the verse

* The sense in which the author understands this phrase is expressed in some observations on the first general head of method, p. 6.

following, there is an obvious gradation from the lesser to the greater : and if by the greater, namely, HERESIES, we are to understand *parties* and *sects*, as the proper signification of the word imports ; then the lesser, *viz.* these DIVISIONS, which are noticed in our text, must have amounted to no more than certain *differences in judgment*. And unless this view of the text is admitted, it is not easy to see with what propriety the apostle could assign the certainty of the last, as a reason for his believing the first. But considering it in this light, the sense is plainly this ; That the apostle was the more easily induced to give credit to the report concerning their differences in judgment, because he foresaw, by the spirit of prophecy, that ere long much worse things would take place among them, namely, different *parties* and opposite *sects*.

We crave leave therefore to view the words in this light, and to observe from them,

That it is not surprising, that differences in judgment should take place among the members of the church.

In the prosecution of this observation we shall, by the favour of God, do the following things.

- I. We shall briefly explain what we mean by *differences in judgment*.
- II. We shall enquire into the *causes* of these differences in judgment.
- III. We shall endeavour to shew how such differences ought to be *managed*.
- IV. We shall mention certain *extremes*, into which both ministers and private members of the church

are in danger of falling, in the management of their differences in judgment.

V. We shall make some practical *improvement* of the whole.

WE are, in the *first* place, to explain briefly what we mean by *differences in judgment*.

1. We speak of differences in judgment, in opposition to these about *matters of faith*. Things plainly revealed in the word of God are the objects not of *opinion*, but of *faith*.

2. We speak of differences in judgment, in opposition to those about *truths* which are already received, and publicly acknowledged by all those who differ. If a society of Christians begin to differ about these capital truths, which they have openly embraced, and endeavour to explain away the true meaning of them; this deserves a far worse name than that of difference in judgment.

3. By differences in judgment we mean the *various opinions* which Christians may entertain about these things, which are acknowledged by all to be *dubious*, and *undetermined* in the word of God.

4. By differences in judgment we intend, such opinions as may take place among the members of the church with respect to the *circumstantials of religion*: such as, these things which regard outward decency, order, and the like, which are left to the determination of gravity and discretion.

5. By these differences in judgment we mean, such opinions in religious matters, neither the receiving, nor the rejecting of which can be proved *sinful* from the word of God, nor *prejudicial* to the interests of morality †.

† As every man has a right to explain his own terms, the

WE proceed to the *second* thing proposed, which is to enquire into the *source* of these differences in judgment.

The first cause to which we shall ascribe them is the *divine permission*. The most High, for wise purposes, allows it to be so; and a very little attention may enable us to discern the wisdom of the divine procedure herein. Were there no differences in judgment among the members of the church, where could place be found for the exercise of *mutual forbearance*? If we exercise this duty only towards those, who are of the same mind with us in every matter, *what thank have we?* may not even publicans do the same? Besides, these differences serve as so many foils to set off the beauties of that amiable grace, *brotherly love*: for this benevolent temper generously surmounts all these obstacles, and disposes us to embrace the man who, in some points, withstands us to the face, if

Author begs this privilege from the reader, when perusing the following pages; and to request he will understand the term, *differences in judgment*, only as explained in the above observations. It would, no doubt, be a very difficult task, to condescend upon all these disputes among Christians, which may be comprehended under this denomination. But surely it were easy to mention several religious opinions, which have occasioned no little controversy in the Christian church, and, perhaps, miserably rent it too, which every one, except those immediately concerned, would deservedly rank among *differences in judgment*. However, the Preacher has declined even doing this; and, perhaps, he has done it with this design, that every one, into whose hands this discourse may come, especially persons of a *certain denomination*, may be put upon examining what is the true amount of their differences with their fellow Christians; and whether the *grounds* of these are such, as will sufficiently warrant the *part* they may have acted.

He bears the image of Christ. Thus, instead of being an occasion of alienating our affection from our fellow Christians, these differences may, like the apostle's bonds, turn out to the *greater furtherance of the gospel*: as they afford us an opportunity of evidencing, that our love to our brethren is founded, neither on their agreement, nor disagreement with our sentiments, but on the sacred lineaments of the image of God which they bear; and that our regard to that lovely object is so genuine, that no impediments whatsoever can restrain the egress of our affection towards it.

2. The differences in judgment which take place among the members of the church, are in part owing to the *many infirmities* with which they are surrounded, while in this imperfect state. Every Christian has not enjoyed the same advantages in point of information; nor has every one the same measure of capacity to receive truths in their proper connexion. It cannot then be expected, that every truth should appear with the like evidence to all. And surely, if we take the measure of other mens intellects by our own, we must see a necessity of making very considerable allowances to those whose judgment does not in every thing coincide with ours. For, how many points have we not met with in the course of our enquiries, which have baffled the utmost efforts of our minds to comprehend them? And who amongst us is not conscious to himself, that he has adopted certain peculiarities of sentiment, which, upon impartial examination, have appeared rather to be the result of weakness and prejudice, than of cool and dispassionate enquiry?

3. These differences in judgment, which take place among Christians, may be imputed to the *imperfect*

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measure of their knowledge. While here, the most exalted genius *knows but in part.* Our views are, at best, extremely contracted and vastly indistinct.—One, perhaps, sees as clearly as we, and yet takes up the object in a very *different light* from that in which we view it. Now, it ought to be remembered, that men are bound to act always according to the measure of their light, if rightly informed from the word of God. By this obligation, therefore, they are laid under a laudible necessity of differing from each other in some things; or, if they do otherwise, they must counteract conviction.—The power of *habit* may also have considerable influence in the present case: for, experience may inform us, that when one has long accustomed himself to view an object in a particular light, it is no easy matter to change his opinion of it, even although it may be a mistake.—Thus the power of prejudice and habit tend to confirm men in their several peculiarities of opinion; and although the evidence in behalf of the point about which they differ, be equally open to all, yet all have not equal discernment to perceive the force of it.

WE go on to the *third* head of the discourse, which is to enquire how these differences in judgment ought to be *managed.*

1. They ought to be managed with *wisdom.* In order to conduct these in a manner becoming the subject, the great requisite is not a turn for *wrangling*, or a talent for *disputation*; but a due portion of *that wisdom that is from above, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated* *. However trifling the grounds of these differences are, if not managed with discre-

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* James iii. 17

tion, they may prove like *the letting out of water*; which at first falleth out in drops, but increasing as it advances, bursts at length unrestrained through every barrier. Many melancholy instances of the truth of this, does the history of the church afford. The prints of these injuries are to be seen, I shall not say with us only, but with every part of the body collective. — If we are influenced by that wisdom, which is profitable to direct in the management of religious differences, we will never suffer our zeal to exceed the importance of the point about which we differ, one with another; nor will we, like Absalom, set our neighbours standing corn on fire, in order to oblige him to comply with our inclinations. Far from having recourse to compulsion of any kind, we will rather be disposed to use the winning methods of persuasion and gentleness.

2. Differences in judgment ought to be managed with *humility*. Nothing tends more to encrease the grounds of these, than pride. And when once this haughty passion hath got the ascendant, it is not easy to determine where the controversy may end: for, what lengths will not men go, when they imagine their honour is at stake, and that their reputation depends upon the issue? Very different from this will our conduct be, if we are under the influence of *humility*. That amiable grace, *lowliness of mind*, will dispose us to *esteem each other better than ourselves**; and inspire us with a diffidence of our own judgment and capacity. And sure, if we possessed any tolerable share of this modest temper, we will never, by a dogmatic obstinacy, endanger the peace of the church, for the sake of our peculiarities in opinion,

* Philip. ii. 3.

when in these, men may safely differ from us, without *erring from the faith, once delivered to the saints* *. Humility is also an excellent mean to gain to our sentiments, those who differ from us: for, when others see that we dare not lay such stress on our judgment, as to reckon it absolutely infallible, this, if they are men of reflection, must tend to make them suspicious of their own, and less peremptory as to the certainty of their conclusions. Humility and vain glory can never well comport. And sure, men cannot give a more striking evidence of their want of a due portion of the former, than by prosecuting differences in judgment, with a view to add to their reputation, or to obtain an occasion of triumphing over their opponents. Fools only will plume themselves with such honours, which are often times owing more to a hardy countenance, a pair of good lungs, and a large share of tenaciousness, than to any superiority either of judgment or understanding.

3. Differences in judgment ought to be managed with *meekness of spirit*. *The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God* †. There cannot be a more unseemly strife than to see men wrangling about divine things, with all the indiscreet fervour of ungoverned passion. The natural impetuosity of some mens temper has a tendency to hurry not only themselves, but others also into unbecoming emotions of spirit: for, even these, who are most remarkable for coolness and serenity of temper, are in danger of catching the infection: and this seldom fails to produce many pointed invectives, and indiscreet reflections, which usually give those who differ the worst opinion of one another, and tend to provoke the injured to retort

* 1 Tim. vi. 10. Jude ver. 3.

† James i. 20.

the abuse. If we would manage our differences in such a way as that God may be glorified, we must endeavour to do this with that meekness of spirit, which, instead of irritating, tends to conciliate. It is surely extremely preposterous, to see men fighting the Lord's battles, with Satan's weapons. This is suspicious armour, and affords occasion for others to make reflections, not very advantageous to the integrity of those who use it: for, to see men combating religious opinions, with all the extravagance of wrath, and intemperance of passion, must naturally lead the unconcerned to think, if not to say,

Tantane animis cœlestibus ira!

4. Differences in judgment ought to be managed with *mutual love* and *charity*. Were brotherly love in due exercise, men would never be disposed to exaggerate the mistakes of others, or to increase the grounds of their difference with them. There is a certain suspicious jealousy which is often productive of the most fatal consequences, when it takes place, either among ministers or private members of the church. This frequently takes its rise from very trifling incidents: and when once men begin to suspect one another, jealousy will not fail to interpret the most innocent word to the disadvantage of him who uttered it; and what would have passed from another unnoticed, if coming from a suspected person, will be explained, perhaps, into a very mystery of error. This jealousy is highly criminal; and the more so, as it has usually no better foundation than that of groundless and unwarrantable prejudices. If we would wish to manage our differences in a Christian way, we must guard against this, and beware of harbouring any jealousies of each others sentiments, unless we have the

most unsuspected reasons for doing so. If we love as brethren, we will differ as brethren : I mean, we will conduct our differences with that charitable temper which becomes this endearing relation ; and we will especially evidence this, in the exercise of mutual forbearance : for, it is one of the grand characteristics of charity, *that it suffereth long, and is kind**. Charity cannot, indeed, act in opposition to evidence ; but when there is no positive evidence against our fellow Christians, we are in that case bound to think favourably of their sentiments.

5. Differences in judgment ought to be managed in an *united way* †. There is great reason to dread the issue of these, when, in the management of them, men fall into different parties, and opposite factions. Then it too often happens, that the controversy, instead of being an humble enquiry after truth, turns out to be a bitter contest for a triumph ; and the great point is not, which party are in the right, but which shall prevail. And if we consider how readily men fall into different parties, in the management of religious differences, we will see the greater necessity of guarding against this extreme : for, as a likeness either of temper or inclinations, naturally recommends one to us before another ; so doth also a resemblance in point of sentiment : and this usually disposes us to attach ourselves to that person, in a particular manner. Having done this, we are in danger of proceeding upon the same implicit principles, on which the connexion was at first formed, and strengthening it by methods too often unjustifiable. For this reason, we ought never to suffer our affection to direct our judgment, in such cases ; for, if through the influence

* 1 Cor. xiii. 4.

† Philip. i. 27.

of particular affection, we are once induced to embark as auxiliaries in a controversy, we are very likely to become principals in the issue; and when, perhaps, we find we have gone too far, and begin to think of retreating, what we before contended for, as a matter of conscience, we will afterwards be in danger of prosecuting, as a point of honour; and in doing this, (may experience never verify the observation!) instead of acting with the calmness of Christians, or the spirit of our character, we will be in hazard of being animated against each other, with all the bitterness of obstinate bigots, or furious partizans.

6. Differences in judgment ought to be managed with *mutual forbearance*, according to the apostle's advice, *forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any* *. It is impossible that any religious differences can be managed to the honour of God, and the edification of his church, unless the contendings about them are conducted *with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; and endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit, in the bond of peace* †. It certainly argues a most intolerable degree of pride, when men insist, that their fellow Christians should be intirely of their mind in every matter; when, perhaps, there are not two, in the whole Christian church, who can pay them this compliment, unless at the expence of their judgment and understanding. No doubt, every member of the church has a right to insist, that all who join with him, in the same communion, shall acknowledge and believe the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, as they are explained in the public standards of that so-

* Colos. iii. 13.

† Eph. iv. 2, 3.

ciety. But, who gave any man, or any minister, a right to obtrude his peculiarities of sentiment upon his fellow Christians, as terms of communion, when, perhaps, these neither affect matters of faith nor Christian practice, but are, at best, matters of *doubtful disputation*, which may be received or rejected, without any injury to revealed truth? Such as rigorously impose their own *nostrums* on others, in this manner, evidently dash out the grace of *mutual forbearance*, as a needless supernumerary duty. For, in what case can the exercise of this be incumbent on us, but in those of differences in judgment? What is evidently *sinful*, ought never to be the object of forbearance: in this case, it is not lawful to give place, no not for an hour. It must, therefore, be either *doubtful opinions*, or *dubious practices*, or both, which are entitled to the exercise of this duty at our hand. How absurd then to pretend, to the exercise of this grace, and yet insist, that these towards whom we exercise it, shall be of our mind in every matter! The very mention of forbearance in such a case, is as preposterous, as it would have been to have talked of giving charity to Croesus*.

WE proceed to the *fourth* thing proposed, which is to mention certain *extremes*, into which both ministers and private members of the church are in danger of falling, in the management of differences in judgment.

1. In managing these differences in judgment, we are in danger of *perverting the meaning* of those who differ from us, and imputing *consequences* to their opinions which they expressly disclaim. Nothing

* One of the richest kings of the East.

be more injurious than to force a man to be the patron of an opinion which he abhors. And surely, if we did to others, as we would wish others to do to us, we would never attempt to oblige any man to be in an error against his will, by charging his opinion with consequences, which are as hateful to him, as they possibly can be to us. What else is this, but endeavouring to force him into an error, whether he will or not? for, if he disclaims the consequence which we would affix to his opinion, as an error, it is plain, he would also renounce the opinion itself, if he was persuaded that it necessarily inferred such a consequence. This is a species of argumentative tyranny which, to the great dishonour of religion, has been too much practised, in the public altercations of many ingenious writers on religious controversies. This method, no doubt, may have very considerable influence with the unthinking part of mankind, to prejudice them against any particular opinion: and accordingly it has, in several instances, been very successfully practised on those, whose judgment cannot serve to discern either the equity, or injustice of such injurious imputations. Hence the masters of this art have found, that the more shocking the consequences are, which they affix to their opponents opinion, the more absurd the premisses from which these are inferred, must necessarily appear to the inattentive and ignorant. Therefore, with such strainers, a difference in judgment from them, about the most trivial matter in religion, shall be loaded with the dreadful consequences of a *falling from the whole truth which their opponents profess*; or, according to a more refined distinction, a *departing from the whole of PROFESSED truth*. When any innocent opinion is so unhappy as to have these, or such like frightful conse-

quences violently fastened on it, the unthinking part of men, who implicitly follow wherever their leaders point out the way, are in danger of being deceived into a fixed contempt and abhorrence of it; but surely, the intelligent observer will easily see through the artifice, and, with a just indignation, despise both the meanness and the chicanery of the contriver.

2. In the management of differences in judgment, men are ready to fall into the extremes of *anger*, *strife*, and *enmity*, and such like unseemly passions. The spirit of God has prepared a sharp reproof for these; and you will observe, that he imputes them to a principle, which is much more criminal before God, than any error in judgment, and that is *carnality*: For, says he, *whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions; are ye not CARNAL, and walk as men* *? The fire of a man's own spirit may occasion much heat about a religious controversy; but it cannot throw any light upon it. On the contrary, it is like raising clouds of dust and smoke, which tend to intercept our views, and darken our apprehensions. Besides, the *beam* in a man's own eye, is but a sorry recommendation for qualifying him to pull out the *mote* out of his neighbour's; and, perhaps, his wrath, who is offended, is much more sinful than his mistake, who is the object of his offence. So that the conduct of such a wrathful disputant is much of a piece with his, who makes a mighty stir about a misplaced hair on his neighbour's head, without taking the least notice of the fiery ulcer which rages in his own bowels.

3. In the management of differences in judgment there is great danger of falling into the extremes of

* 1 Cor. iii. 3.

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uncharitableness, and *harsh censures* on those who differ from us. This practice is extremely unbecoming; and such as are guilty of it, will have much to do to answer that solemn interrogatory, *Why dost thou judge thy brother* *? By this question, I imagine, the apostle intended not only to rebuke those fiery spirits, who are ready to deal *damnation* with an undistinguishing hand, on all who differ from them; but these also who, even by shrewd hints, or injurious insinuations, endeavour to fix a suspicion of *hypocrisy* or *dissimulatio*n on those who are not, in every matter, of their sentiments. The most upright intentions will be no security against the censures of their uncharitable temper: for, this malicious spirit will make no allowances even to integrity itself. And surely, men cannot give stronger proof of their being influenced by this perverse *disposition*, than by putting harsh constructions on the candid appearances of others; or ascribing that to *wickedness*, which the most scrupulous charity would impute only to *weakness*. They who thus misinterpret the actions of others, by taking every thing by the wrong handle, would do well to remember, that, in this case, it is easy to retaliate; for, others have it in their power to think as harshly of them, as they can possibly do of others.

4. Another extreme, in the management of differences in judgment, is a *vain wrangling about words*, and *particular modes of expression*. This contention, however trifling in its nature, is often pernicious in its consequences: especially when men have adopted certain modes of speech, and taken it into their heads, to make these a criterion for trying the

* Rom. xiv. 20.

sentiments of others on the point in debate. To recede in the least from these, they think would be to yield their cause: therefore they adhere to them with the most inflexible obstinacy, while their opponents as vehemently inveigh against the use of them: and yet, perhaps, the meaning of both parties is the same, only they are unhappily prejudiced against each others terms. Sure there can be no words of human invention worth the half of this strife, far less can either the use or disuse of them, counterbalance the mischief which the debate about them may occasion. No doubt, the doctrines of the gospel ought to be expressed in the most approved and unsuspected terms. The apostle insists, that we should *consent to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ*, as well as to the DOCTRINE which is according to godliness †. But as to matters of difference in judgment, no man has a right to oblige another to use any other terms, than what seems to him most proper. And yet, with what outrageous zeal, have men contended for their particular modes of expressions, risking even the peace of the church, for the sake of their bigotted attachment to a few syllables!

It is impossible to exhibit the folly of such puerile contentions, in so striking a light as by condescending upon an instance of it. To the disgrace of many controversial writers in divinity, we might find abundance of these in their polemical compositions; but we choose rather to exemplify this from the writings of philosophers: and sure, what is ridiculous in philosophy, must be much more so in divinity.

How egregiously trifling then was that mighty quibble betwixt the *Platonists* and *Stoics*, with re-

† 1 Tim. vi. 3.

spect to the nature of these things which contribute to the support of animal life! *Plato*, and his followers, affirmed, that these things were properly GOODS; while *Zeno*, and his disciples, exclaimed against the impropriety of the expression, and alledged, they were only *things conducing to good*. The *Platonists* asserted, that a *wise man hath mercy*: while the *Stoics* affirmed, that this was little less than heresy in philosophy; for, said these wrangling disputants, it can by no means be said of a wise man that he hath MERCY, but that he SPARETH *. The very repetition of this ludicrous altercation is, I confess, hardly suited to the dignity of a grave discourse. Let impartiality then judge, how unbecoming the imitation of it is, in men of a grave character.

5. Another dangerous extreme, in the management of differences in judgment, is that of making *our own apprehension the standard*, for *measuring the orthodoxy of others*, in these matters. This is an error, which has frequently produced the most fatal consequences; especially, when men have obstinately insisted, that an entire acquiescence in all peculiarities, could be the only terms of Christian coalescence with them. We need only go an hundred years backward in history for a proof of this. About that period an union was proposed betwixt the two great bodies of Protestants in England †. Both professed the utmost willingness to have this accomplished:

* Gale's court of the Gentiles, Vol. II.

† In the year 1661, a commission was issued out by Charles the Second, empowering a considerable number of Presbyterian and Episcopal divines to meet in the Savoy, in order to agree upon a plan of comprehension for uniting both. The commissioners of both denominations met accordingly; but, alas! with

and yet it is well known, that the reigning party had no design to consent to an agreement with their brethren, unless upon *their own terms*; and these were an intire acquiescing with them, not only in the more important points in dispute, but almost in all the lesser matters of difference, which had ever been combated between them. So the issue declared; for, because they could not think precisely as they thought, with respect to *tippetts* and *surplices*, and such like matters, the conferences were broken up, and the poor dissenters reckoned a set of men, whose bigotry was such, that it deserved to be chastised by the vengeance of the civil magistrate. Accordingly, he very readily undertook the task; and, in order to enlarge their views, and enlighten their consciences, forced some of them into exile, and condemned others to the gloom of a prison, or the horrors of a dungeon. And it will not exceed the bounds of charity to affirm, that they who rigidly insist upon an entire agreement with them, on every matter of judgment, as the only terms of unity with them,

a very different temper. The divines of the Presbyterian persuasion evidenced the utmost readiness to yield in *lesser matters* to their brethren; but the haughty spirit of Prelacy refused to give up so much as a single ceremony for the sake of peace. Yea, such was the obstinacy of the Episcopal divines, that they would not oblige the Presbyterians so far, as to recede from one single expression, refusing even to change the words, *deadly sin*, in the Liturgy, into *heinous sin*. Thus that salutary design was blasted, and the issue of the Savoy conferences too plainly verified that striking saying of the celebrated bishop Hall; *There are men who will bow at the name of Jesus, and swear by the God of heaven, who could find in their hearts to set the world in flames for a circumstance.* See Baxter's History of his own Life, and Nichol's Commentary on the Preface to the Common Prayer.

would not scruple, were it in their power, to persecute all those who have the courage to differ from them: for, they who can impose on the consciences of others, can also make use of any methods, even of boots and thumbkins to enforce the imposition.

There is, therefore, great need to guard against making *our views a standard for others*, in matters of difference in judgment: for, there is in this much more of natural corruption than of divine grace. How natural is it for us to wish, that all others were not only *almost*, but *altogether such as we are*? And very often we have not the apostle's discretion, to except our *bonds and infirmities* *. As a proof of this, you may observe, that many of these authors, who have written on the glory of the church, in the latter days, have not only told us, that all the followers of Christ will be then of *one* mind, but have even given shrewd hints, that they expect they will be of *their* mind in every matter; although it may be evident to all but themselves, that were it to be so, the glory of the church in the latter days, would be of a different kind from that which it enjoyed in the apostolic age.

6. It is a very great extreme, in the management of differences in judgment, when men are guilty of *overlooking the things wherein they are AGREED*, and *insisting continually on these about which they DIFFER*. When this takes place, it betrays an unhappy disposition for strife: for, what can be a stronger evidence of this, than for men who are agreed, in the whole truths of revelation, both with respect to doctrine, discipline, and government, to wrangle notwith-

* Acts xxvi. 29.

standing about a mere punctilio, as if their agreement in all things, signified nothing, in comparison of their differing in this? This cannot possibly be owing to any defect in the genius of these doctrines, for promoting peace and unity among mankind: it ought rather to be ascribed to the little influence, which they have upon the minds of those who profess to believe them, and to their unaccountable propensity to strife. For, if men were not absolutely bent upon contention, how could they overlook their agreement with their brethren in every weighty matter, and yet break the ties both of unity and affection with them, upon the account of their differing from them, perhaps about the propriety of an expression, or the etymology of a word? Certain it is, experience can condescend upon a variety of instances, in which even such very trifling differences have, amongst men of a factious humour, proved a gulf to swallow up all these other weighty considerations. Of which I know not a more proper emblem, than that of Pharaoh's seven ill-favoured and lean-fleshed cattle, which he saw in his sleep, eat up and devour the seven fat and well-favoured kine*.

7. Another extreme, of which there is great danger, in the management of differences in judgment, is a *keenness of having these disputes continued*. There are some men who, when they have once fallen into the humour of disputation, and tried their talents with any tolerable success, are seldom afterwards guilty of hiding these in a napkin, but are ready to catch at the first occasion of rekindling the flames of debate. This natural propensity to altercation has

* Gen. xli. 18, 19.

much need to be restrained, if men would not wish to perpetuate their differences with their fellow Christians. It is easier to occasion a flame, than to extinguish it; and very trifling differences, if prosecuted with indiscretion, and persisted in with obstinacy, may occasion melancholy consequences in the issue: for, it often happens, that in striving about differences in judgment, the strife, by being perpetuated, turns out more to the prejudice of religion, than any mistake about the point in debate could possibly have done. Besides, it is highly improbable, that we shall make those who differ from us proselytes to our sentiments, by our obstinacy and tenaciousness. On the contrary, it is more likely we will confirm them in their peculiarities, by the indiscreet warmth with which we prosecute ours. It is, therefore, our duty, as Christians, and our interest as members of society, to drop matters of differences in judgment, when we cannot come to an amicable agreement about them. For there are few, who have any experience of the malignant effects of these; and the prejudice which they have occasioned to the interests of religion; but will readily acknowledge, that they have often cost the church of Christ a thousand times more than they are worth. A costly purchase surely, to have a trifling dispute set to rights, at the expence of the peace and unity of the church.

WE shall now conclude with some practical *improvement* of what has been said.

Permit me, therefore, my reverend Fathers and Brethren, to attempt this, with a particular view to the capacity in which we are to meet, on this occasion. With your leave, then, I shall endeavour to do this, with that discretion which becomes my stand-

ing in the ministry, and that freedom also which my function warrants.

1. Seeing differences in judgment, amongst the members of the church, need be no surprise to us, let us not think a *whet the worse of one another, for our differing in LESSER matters*. Such as have any tolerable acquaintance with human nature, will never be surprised that others cannot acquiesce in their views, in every matter. This can hardly be expected amongst any number of conscientious men; for such must necessarily approve or disapprove of things according to the measure of their light, whatever views others may have of these matters.

2. Since the imprudent management of differences in judgment may be productive of such hurtful consequences, let us endeavour, if at any time we shall be laid under the necessity of differing from others, to conduct these matters with that *meekness and discretion*, which becomes those who *seek the peace of Zion*. No doubt, the proper way of managing our differences, is to endeavour, by all means, to crush them. Sad experience may convince us, *how great a matter a little fire kindleth*, especially when fanned up by the breath of controversy and disputation. Differences in judgment, like a river in its progress, gather always more strength the farther they go; and what might have been easily restrained, at its first appearance, often swells to all the impetuosity of a torrent, before it reaches the end of its course.

3. In the management of such differences as may take place amongst us, let us endeavour to exercise *mutual forbearance towards each other*. All of us need favourable allowances at one anothers hands; and the more sensible we are of our need of these, the more readily will we grant them to others. Let us,

therefore, bear with one anothers infirmities; remembering, that the differences which may arise amongst us, may be as much owing to our particular weakness, as to that of others. And, by all means, let us beware of giving the sanction of conscience to every trifling dispute. You know nothing ought to affect our consciences but what concerns the glory of God; and, I may well affirm, that the glory of God has suffered more, by obstinate controversies, on matters of difference in judgment, than it could have done which ever side of the point in debate had been admitted.

4. Let us take care not to *interest our hearers* in these differences of judgment, which may take place amongst us. Many differences may arise among us, the knowlege of which can neither profit their judgment, nor mend their morals; or, if they can be in any way servicable to them, it is, alas! by affording them matter of mourning and lamentation. And we all know, that the disputing humour among our people needs no incentives: for, when once they have got sufficient fuel for controversy laid to their hands, it will not be long ere they set all around them in a fire; and, perhaps, it may require all our address to extinguish the flames. The generality of people will greedily listen to matters of disputation†; and whatever side of the debate we shall happen to take, they will be sure to out-run us, and carry the matter much farther than ever we intended. And if it shall so happen, that we find reason to change our opinion, which every man upon better information, may laudably do, in matters of difference in judgment; yet we will find it no easy matter to put

† *Omnes disputare malunt quam vivere.*

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our hearers where we found them, and eradicate these prejudices out of their minds, which we have, in the height of zeal, formerly implanted.

5. Since there is such danger of extremes, in the management of differences in judgment, let us *keep our eye upon these*, and *avoid them*, as so many rocks, on which the ark of God is in danger of being dashed to pieces. Let us study unity in our ends and designs. The professed design of our association is to adhere to the doctrine, discipline, and government of the church of Scotland, against the several instances of defection condescended upon in the *Act and Testimony*. Therefore, let us evidence a becoming regard to these principles, for which many of our progenitors so gloriously fought and fell. And let us join our endeavours to promote the interests of Christ's kingdom, by recommending practical godliness and sincere piety. If we are united in our *ends*, we will be in less danger of differing as to the *means* proper for promoting these ends: and any means, which may have a tendency to divide or distract us, in the pursuit of the great end which we propose, ought never to be urged, as they carry in them a downright contradiction to the end of our association. *The integrity of the upright*, says Solomon, *shall guide them; and the righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way* *. Integrity and uprightness as to the great design, will naturally lead to unity and harmony, as to the means of accomplishing it.

6. From what has been said, we may see the necessity of studying *unity and peace*. Let us remember, that it is not only *pleasant unto God*, but *good also for the church*, when *brethren dwell together*

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* Prov. xi. 3, 5.

in unity †. Faithfulness and forbearance may very well comport; and unity and purity are by no means incompatible, unless when the perverseness of men makes them so. We may *contend earnestly for the faith, once delivered to the saints*, without distracting the church with our contentions. When we reflect upon that melancholy truth, which ecclesiastic history too well avouches, namely, that the most of all these dismal calamities, which have rent and torn in pieces the church of Christ, have been occasioned by the extravagances of men of our order, the very thoughts of our injuring the interests of religion, by our dissensions, were enough to chill our blood, and excite us to all possible caution in the management of our differences: for if the righteous God shall be provoked to suffer us to be hurried on by the impetuosity of our own spirits, to such extremes, as may rent the body of Christ, I am sure our successors will have reason to inscribe our monuments with INFAMY; and to say of us, that it had been good for the church of Christ, that we had not been born; because the mischief we have occasioned to religion, has greatly overbalanced any poor services which we ever did it. Let us remember, that if we *bite and devour one another*, we are in danger of being *consumed one of another*. Let us cultivate concord, harmony, and peace. No doubt, these blessings are too dearly bought, when purchased at the expence of a good conscience; but when they may be had for the trouble of restraining our own spirits, sopiting our differences, and forbearing one another, they are an easy, and important acquisition. The proper way to succeed in our endeavours after peace, is to employ that

† Psalm cxxxiii. 1.

glorious person to maintain it amongst us, who has assumed that amiable character of being *our peace**. He stands bound to his own faithfulness to *give us one heart and one way*†. Let us therefore importune him, by continual prayer, for these blessings, and earnestly request the accomplishment of that ancient promise, *Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing; for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion*‡. And that this glorious event may be anticipated, *I beseech you, Fathers and Brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same things, that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment*||.

May God, of his infinite mercy, grant, that our councils and determinations may tend to the promoting of peace, and the establishment of truth in the earth.

BEFORE I conclude, I must observe, that the edge of this discourse is turned towards you who are our *hearers*, as well as us who are *ministers*. Your differences in judgment, if not duly managed may be hurtful to religion, as well as ours; especially, if these shall prove a mean of alienating your affection from your fellow Christians: for, if once the ties of brotherly love are broken, those of church communion will not long subsist. Beware of that religion, which spends more of its breath in disputation, than in prayer: and never concern yourselves with any dispute, unless it appear, that some revealed truth

* Eph. iii. 14.

† Jer. xxxii. 32. 39.

‡ Isaiah lii. 8.

|| 1 Cor. i. 10.

is at stake. If this is the case, then you are called to step forth, and contend earnestly for the faith, once delivered to the saints*. But, if it is only a question about words, or names, let others look to it; but be ye judges of no such matters†: for you will find that these things do eat as doth a canker, and in the end will increase to more ungodliness‡. To add no more, Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. It is like precious ointment on the head, that ran down the beard, even Aaron's beard, that went down to the skirts of his garments. As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descendeth on the mountain of Zion; for there the Lord commandeth the blessing, even life for ever more.∥.

* Jude ver. 3.

† 2 Tim. ii. 16, 17.

† Acts xviii. 15.

∥ Psalm cxxxiii.

THE END.

